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A call for liberation and dialogue

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When the minority challenges the accepted wisdom, it angers the majority, sometimes to the extent of violence. On the documents presented by the Palestinian citizens of Israel

The Adalah Center recently published its proposal for a "Democratic Constitution," based "on universal principles, international conventions on human rights, the experience of nations, and the laws of various democratic states." This proposal fits in well with "The Future Vision for Palestinian Arabs in Israel" document composed by a group of intellectuals, activists, mayors and other public figures.

In historical perspective, these documents are very important because the Palestinian public in Israel is defining its identity and aspirations through them. In addition, it poses a challenge to the Jewish majority and to the state by proposing joint principles and basic assumptions for resolving the relations between them.

These documents are not the result of desperation or a desire to remain apart, as voices from the Jewish public often claim. On the contrary, the documents are the product of a bold, conscious and calculated move of taking responsibility vis-à-vis Arab society itself and vis-à-vis Jewish society. The documents offer democracy as the desired type of government and oppose the preference of the Jewish ethnic majority group, which enjoys various privileges over the Arab indigenous-minority group. In addition, the documents oppose the mechanisms of control, supervision and oppression imposed by the state and by the Jewish majority on the Palestinian minority. Moreover, the Arab citizens treat the concept of citizenship in the modern state seriously, and are trying to fill it with new content and meaning that would ensure equal personal and collective rights, and do away with the hierarchy of citizenships in place today.

The authors of the documents start from the assumption that Israeli democracy is very weak, and that there is a fundamental contradiction between its definition as a Jewish and democratic state, with the state often sacrificing its "procedural democracy" on the altar of its substantive Jewishness.

When the minority challenges the accepted wisdom, this enrages the majority, sometimes to the extent of violence. The well-known educator Paulo Freire claims that at a certain stage in the relations between the oppressor and the oppressed these relations reach a breaking point. This break occurs when the oppressed person liberates himself from fear and, consequently, liberates his oppressor as well. Thus, one can see in these documents a harbinger of Arab liberation from fear and, at the same time, an explicit invitation for the Jewish majority and state to free themselves from the old, accepted concepts. This is a call for liberation from the concepts that have entrenched alienation and discrimination, and have inflamed racism, and a call to adopt instead the principles of equality, liberty and justice.

It is very saddening to hear the stridently critical and hasty reactions from Jewish public opinion makers, such as: "a declaration of war," "they shot themselves in the foot," "separatism," "Israeli society must internalize the growing danger of the minority," and many other statements that are similar or even worse. The list of those who are "worried," "troubled" or "confused" gets longer every morning. Similar reactions were sounded in the 1960s in the U.S. during the struggle of the civil rights movement and in the 1980s in South Africa.

These documents present the Jewish majority and the state's institutions an historic opportunity to conduct a real and frank dialogue, motivated by a sense of responsibility for the future, based on partnership and full equality between the two national groups in the state, and grounded in a commitment to the universal principles of equality, justice and freedom.

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